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ABSTRACT

Learning disabled (LD) (N=16) and non-learning disabled (non-LD) (N=16) college students completed the Tennessee Self-Concept Scale and were compared with regard to various aspects of self-concept. Mean scores of LD students were higher than those of non-LD subjects on the overall scale and all eight subscales, but differences between group means were significant only on the subscale measuring ethical-moral self-concept. No other significant differences were found between self-concept in LD and non-LD subjects. Contains 10 references. (Author/PB)

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SELF CONCEPT: LEARNING DISABLED VS. NON-LEARNING DISABLED
COLLEGE STUDENTS

By

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Summary of a Master's Thesis

Prepared for

The Graduate College

University of Wisconsin-Stout

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ABSTRACT

College students with learning disabilities present unique concerns to university academic and supportive services staffs. While learning and counseling needs of younger learning disabled (LD) students have been studied widely, the literature on adult LD students is much less extensive. Particularly in the area of self concept, little empirical research exists which describes the college LD population.

In this study, learning disabled and non-learning disabled students at the University of Wisconsin-Stout were compared with regard to various aspects of self concept. Thirty-two students (16 LD and 16 non-LD, matched in terms of sex, year in school, G.P.A., and age) completed the Tennessee Self Concept Scale. Their scores on the overall scale, eight subscales, and the validity scale were analyzed for significant differences using the Wilcoxon signed-ranks test for matched pairs.

Data analysis of the TSCS results revealed that the LD students scored much like their non-LD counterparts on measures of self concept. Mean scores of the LD group were higher than those of the non-LD group on the overall scale and the eight subscales, but the differences between group means were significant only on one subscale, that measuring moral-ethical self concept. It was concluded that participating LD students did not exhibit significantly poorer self concepts than those of non-LD peers.

Self Concept: Learning Disabled Vs. Non-Learning Disabled College Students

Learning disabled college students constitute a relatively recent and poorly understood phenomenon. The fact that the learning disabled are attending college in sizable numbers is attributable to the passage of federal legislation on behalf of the disabled, to heightened public awareness of educational opportunities, and, finally, to declining enrollment trends currently affecting colleges and universities. With the arrival of these students on campus, many questions have arisen about appropriate and effective postsecondary programming for the learning disabled. Research to date has focused largely on the intellectual/academic functioning of the students. Additionally, some studies (Gordon, 1974; Cronin & Gerber, 1982) have alluded to concerns regarding the personal adjustment of learning disabled (LD) adolescents and adults. Professionals have typically assumed that socio-emotional concerns identified in other LD populations obtain among LD college students as well.

Evidence from the literature on psychosocial characteristics of learning disabled children, adolescents, and adults points to the possibility of social and emotional difficulties among LD college students (Mangrum and Strichart, 1984; Putnam, 1984). This evidence is drawn largely from clinical and observational reports; supporting empirical data is somewhat less clear-cut (Hutchinson, 1984; Gorsuch, 1985). A primary socio-emotional concern for the learning disabled as a whole, as well as for learning disabled college students, is the area of self concept. Despite the lack of a large body of supporting research, counseling programs employing a variety of techniques are routinely prescribed and implemented to address this concern in the LD college student population (Ganschow and Washington, 1983; Faigel, 1985). Nevertheless, there remains a need for more data either to confirm or to refute the assumptions underlying these programs.

Research Method

The research was a causal-comparative study in which self concepts of a sample of LD college students were compared with those of a matched sample of non-LD college students. The purpose of the study was to determine whether, as has been reported anecdotally and clinically, the two groups differ significantly in terms of self concept.

Description of the Population

For the purposes of this study, learning disabled college students were defined as those college students who had been identified, through psychoeducational assessment at the university or in their home school districts, as eligible for public special education services. Because such eligibility is based on an ability/achievement discrepancy, this research definition implies a significant discrepancy between the LD student's cognitive ability and that student's actual academic performance.

The population under investigation comprised learning disabled college students enrolled at the University of Wisconsin-Stout, a public university located in western Wisconsin. U.W.-Stout grants both baccalaureate and graduate degrees in a variety of vocational and educational fields; it is not a liberal arts institution. Support services for learning disabled, academically disadvantaged, and nontraditional students are numerous. Learning disabled students have access to texts on tape, specialized academic advisement, counseling, tutoring, instructional modifications, diagnostic assessment, and support groups. Because of the focused academic mission of U.W.-Stout and the variety of support services available to learning disabled student, the population may not be a typical representation of learning disabled college students as a whole.

Selection of Subjects

A group of 16 learning disabled college students enrolled at U.W.-Stout constituted the experimental sample in the study. These subjects were recruited on a voluntary basis through existing support channels for LD students. Although no attempt was made to recruit equal numbers of males and females, eight members of each sex were

a part of the experimental sample. The group included three freshmen, three sophomores, three juniors, five seniors, and two graduate students. Their grade point averages (G.P.A.'s) on a four point scale ranged from 1.6 to 4.0, with a mean of 2.6. Their ages ranged from 18 to 35 years, with a mean of 23.9 years.

A control group of 16 non-learning disabled students was recruited from the general student population and from education classes. Control students were matched exactly with LD students on the variables of sex and year in school. They were also matched as closely as possible in terms of G.P.A. and age. The control G.P.A.'s ranged from 2.0 to 3.8, with a mean of 2.8, while the ages of the control group ranged from 19 to 37 years, with a mean age of 22.3 years (see Table 1).

Table 1: Characteristics of Sample

Matched Pair	Sex		Yr. in School		Age		G.P.A.	
	LD	NLD	LD	NLD	LD	NLD	LD	NLD
1	F	F	1	1	18	19	2.6	2.7
2	M	M	1	1	19	19	1.7	2.4
3	M	M	1	1	19	19	2.8	2.5
4	F	F	2	2	34	19	2.6	2.5
6	M	M	2	2	21	20	1.6	2.8
7	F	F	3	3	21	23	1.7	2.0
8	M	M	3	3	24	21	3.2	3.1
9	M	M	3	3	21	21	2.8	2.8
10	F	-F	4	4	22	22	3.2	3.2
11	F	F	4	4	34	23	2.5	2.4
12	M	M	4	4	26	24	2.8	2.9
13	M	M	4	4	22	23	2.5	2.9
14	M	M	4	4	22	24	2.3	2.5
15	F	F	5+	5+	24	23	3.4	3.8
16	F	F	5+	5+	35	37	4.0	3.8
Mean					23.9	22.3	2.6	2.8
High					35	37	4.0	3.8
Low					18	19	1.6	2.0

LD=Learning disabled student

NLD=Non-learning disabled student

Instrument Selection

The Tennessee Self Concept Scale (TSCS) was selected because it provides measures of overall self concept as well as self concept related to four specific areas (physical, social, moral-ethical, family) and across three modalities (identity, self satisfaction, behavior). The self criticism scale serves as a validity check for an individual's scale scores. Widely used in research on college populations, the TSCS is composed of 100 items written on a sixth-grade level, making it especially attractive for use with learning disabled students. The TSCS can be administered in both written and oral form, generally in about twenty minutes.

Data Analysis

Raw scores on the ten scales of the TSCS were computed for each of the 32 participants. Intergroup differences for the 32 learning disabled and non-learning disabled students were examined by comparing, both descriptively and inferentially, the total self concept scores, scores from the eight subscales, and scores from the validity (self criticism) scale. Means, standard deviations, and ranges were computed for each group on each of the ten scores (Table 2). The mean scores of both groups on the overall self concept scale as well as on most subscales fell somewhat below the mean of the test norm group.

Table 2: TSCS Means, Standard Deviations, and Ranges

Scale	Mean		S.D.		Range	
	LD	NLD	LD	NLD	LD	NLD
Total	339.0	320.9	47.1	42.2	245-406	251-371
Identity	122.4	116.6	16.0	16.9	85-146	87-134
S.Satis.	107.1	100.5	18.1	15.0	77-130	77-120
Behavior	109.4	103.8	15.1	13.4	78-133	79-122
Physical	66.5	62.5	11.7	10.5	40-82	42-75
Moral	70.8	63.1	10.0	10.4	53-86	45-78
Personal	66.1	64.5	10.6	10.0	49-82	48-80
Family	69.9	65.7	10.9	9.2	48-86	53-81
Social	65.8	65.1	10.7	8.9	45-84	50-76
Self Critic.	34.3	35.5	6.1	5.3	24-48	25-46

D=Learning disabled student

NLD=Non-learning disabled student

Significance of intergroup differences was computed for each scale using the Wilcoxon matched-pairs signed-ranks test, a nonparametric test of significance for nonindependent paired scores where N is greater than 12 but less than 25.

Application of the Wilcoxon test indicated that intergroup differences were not statistically significant for all but one (moral-ethical self concept) of the scales (Table 3).

Table 3: Wilcoxon Values for TSCS Scale Scores

TSCS Scale	Wilcoxon z value	2-tailed p value	Significance at $p < .05$
Total	-1.5571	.1148	No
Identity	-1.3961	.1627	No
Self-Satisfaction	-1.0600	.2891	No
Behavior	-1.4220	.1550	No
Physical	-1.1893	.2343	No
Moral-Ethical	-2.0447	.0409	Yes
Personal	-.2272	.8203	No
Family	-1.4483	.1475	No
Social	-.1883	.8506	No
Self Criticism	-.5947	.5521	No

In summary, the data analysis revealed that the learning disabled college students in this study were much like their non-disabled peers on most measures of self concept. Differences between the groups were in the direction of more positive self concepts for the learning disabled group; nevertheless, for all scales but one, these differences were not statistically significant. Also, the learning disabled students did not appear to be less self-critical (i.e. to provide less valid scores) than their peers.

Conclusions and Discussion

The learning disabled college students who participated in this study manifested self concepts that, on all nine TSCS measures, appeared to be at least as positive as those of their non-disabled peers. Although the groups scored quite similarly on the measures of self concept, both groups' mean scores fell below the mean scores of the test norm group on overall self concept and most other scales. Nevertheless, it can be concluded that the U.W.-Stout LD students who participated in this study did not, in

general, exhibit the pathologically poor self concept that has often been attributed to the LD population.

A number of factors may explain why learning disabled students at U.W.-Stout closely resemble their non-learning disabled classmates on this measure of self concept. One factor may be the unique nature of the U.W.-Stout student population. Because the institution emphasizes practical, prevocational preparation rather than liberal arts training, students show a wider range of academic ability than would be found at many liberal arts colleges. Related to the uniqueness of the Stout student body is the existence of an effective and widely used supportive services network; the participation of most learning disabled students in these services may further explain their comparatively higher self concepts. Another explanation for the lack of intergroup differences may be the possibility that LD college students are fundamentally different from the learning disabled who do not attend college. A positive self concept may be the essential force in driving these students to, and eventually through, college. Finally, it may be that the learning disabled are not, after all, as different from the non-disabled as professionals generally believe. Indeed, assumptions about the poor adjustment of the learning disabled have not been uniformly supported when put to the empirical test (Clarke, 1981; Gorsuch, 1985; Williams et al., 1985).

Although the intent of this study was to provide information about particular concerns of LD college students in the area of self concept, the results raise a number of questions and point to the need for further research. A broader base of descriptive data on the counseling concerns of LD college students should guide the efforts of college level clinicians, who have had to rely on extrapolations of information drawn from research on other LD student groups. Perhaps basic assumptions about personality characteristics of the learning disabled are of limited validity when applied to learning disabled college students.

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